

INTELLECTUAL UNREST BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

The Rebellion of the Communist Clerks

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THERE is ferment among the intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain. It has so far manifested itself most dramatically in Poland and Hungary where a full-blown literature of rebellion emerged last year, but the symptoms of nonconformism among the *literati* are unmistakable in the USSR as well.

In this article I shall deal, not with the intellectual stratum as a whole, but with that section of it which carries most political weight: the party intelligentsia. By this I mean one of the key groups in Communist society: intellectuals (writers, artists, scholars, journalists) who are officially recognized as combining specialized skills with ideological competence. Their function consists in shaping people's mental processes in accordance with the party's ideological requirements. This is a task of some political significance, and the party intelligentsia accordingly enjoys a highly privileged status. But it has a relatively small share in decision-making and administrative power. That power largely belongs to the party apparatus, a corporation of bureaucrats whose qualifications are political rather than intellectual.

The managerial and technological elite may be considered as forming part of the intelligentsia in a wider sense, since it owes its standing to the possession of specialized

intellectual skills. But for this category ideological competence is not essential, as it is for the party intelligentsia in the narrow sense. Moreover, there are many intellectuals in Communist society who have no recognized status at all: students, most non-party intellectuals, the remnants of the old "alien class" intelligentsia, and so on. All these groups contributed to the intellectual ferment which is the topic of this article. Nevertheless, the major nonconformist tendencies originated within the party intelligentsia, and this is what made them politically significant.

WHAT strikes the reader most about the literature of rebellion produced by Communist writers in Poland and Hungary in the revolutionary year 1956 is its intensely personal, confessional character. The dominant note is one of mourning over ideals sullied, promises betrayed, the image of man insulted and debased with the writers' own connivance. This is what the Polish writer Edda Werfel called "the tragedy of the Communists" in an article published shortly before the October days of 1956. She evoked "this whole world of illusions and lies proclaimed as supreme truths, all these crimes which, with an obstinacy worthy of a better cause, we persisted in calling mistakes, this nightmare from which we awakened one day." And she went on to say: "As far as we Communists are concerned, we not only have the duty to wipe out our own tragedy and, what is even more important, meditate upon all its implications; we are also under the obligation to show some humility in the presence of the tragedy of the entire nation. The fact that Communists, too, are unhappy represents no justification whatever."

THIS month marks the first anniversary of the Hungarian tragedy. PAUL KECSKEMETI, in a survey of the confessional writings that have appeared behind the Iron Curtain, attempts to gauge the strength and political significance of the shock which the events in Hungary and Poland created among the party's intellectuals. Mr. Kecskemeti, a veteran contributor, is on the staff of the Rand research organization. He is the author of *Meaning, Communication, and Value* (1952).

Another Polish writer, Andrzej Braun, described his moral dilemma as a Communist in an article published in March 1956:

My friend X. disappeared one day. It was rumored that he had been arrested for counter-revolutionary activities. I was convinced that the charges were unfounded, but then he was condemned in the name of the Cause, i. e. in my own name. If my own government condemns him in the name of my principles, this can only be just and wise, whereas I am simply ignorant of the facts, *I don't know*. But the important thing is not the fate of my friend X. and the way in which his case was handled. The important thing is the process that went on in my own conscience. I myself suppressed and killed in myself a certain moral conviction, a certain principle, in the name of another principle which was also my own.

THIS theme appears, in countless variations, in the confessional writings of Polish and Hungarian Communists: we killed in ourselves the voice of our heart, our conscience, our intellect. We thought that loyalty to the cause demanded this, but now we see that we were wrong. The evils which we refused to acknowledge brought total discredit on the party; by covering up we cut ourselves off from the people (thus the Hungarian writer Gyula Hay).

It would be wrong to interpret these passionate outbursts of self-accusation as signs of a total conversion, or of a final break with the Communist doctrine and movement. Their authors cannot envisage a satisfactory ethical system without collectivist underpinnings. To them, active participation in the revolutionary struggle is still the supreme moral task; a purely individualist ethic, unrelated to this task, is hopelessly inadequate for our age. Yet they note with anguish that the Communist movement, and they themselves as its spokesmen, have "gone too far" in stressing the collective goal and disregarding the moral (as well as aesthetic and intellectual) demands of the individual. This one-sidedness has led to tragic consequences; the climate it has created within the movement is humanly unendurable. Hence nothing remains but to make a fresh start and work out a new,

balanced relationship between the individual and the collectivity.

It was, of course, easier to state this problem than to solve it. A way had now to be found to safeguard the indispensable minimum of personal values within the framework of revolutionary collectivism, but how could this be done? The confessional literature contains no firm answers to this question. By merely raising it, however, the authors have achieved something important. They have punctured the outrageous paradox by means of which the Communist party under Stalin held the consciences of its followers in thrall: to be a revolutionary meant being totally subservient to constituted authority; the individual's self-assertion was reactionary by definition. The party intelligentsia had been receptive to this paradox because it felt insecure within the Communist movement. Not being authentic "workers," the intellectuals viewed themselves with suspicion. It was the party apparatus that embodied the essence of the movement. Mere intellectuals had to look up to it and dismiss their personal scruples as remnants of reactionary individualism.

This self-abasement enabled the intellectual to rise above his suspect origins and become a genuine revolutionary. What the confessional writings show is the self-emancipation of the party intelligentsia, its refusal to recognize in the apparatus the sole embodiment of the historic mission of the proletariat. The rebellious writers proclaimed that the bureaucracy represented only itself, while the revolutionary idea found genuine expression outside its ranks.

The rebellious party intelligentsia did not question the orthodox thesis that the West stands for "reaction," while the Communist world is essentially "revolutionary" and "progressive." These slogans have retained their suggestive force, but the rebels no longer hold to the Stalinist paradox. On the contrary, they deny that opposition to the entrenched apparatus can be equated with reaction and counter-revolution. It is rather the apparatus that stands for reactionary tendencies in the Communist world.

IN THE USSR the party intelligentsia did not rebel against the regime with anything like the same vehemence. There are, however, indications that within the Russian party intelligentsia, too, Stalinist dogma has lost its suggestive force. The official thesis on Hungary (namely, that the Soviet intervention served to crush a counter-revolution) carried no conviction among Soviet intellectuals. It is known that when a professor expounded this doctrine at a meeting of Moscow university students in November 1956, a member of the audience challenged him by pointing out that the Hungarian workers had proclaimed a general strike. It was, then, absurd to call the Hungarian uprising a counter-revolution; how could the workers strike against their own authority? The professor was unable to meet this argument, and when he tried to steer the discussion to the safe topic of "Horthy-Fascist officers," the students shouted him down. Similar incidents were reported from other universities.

Even before the Hungarian revolution, the decay of Stalinism had manifested itself in imaginative literature. The official doctrine of "socialist realism" requires writers to portray contemporary reality from the viewpoint of a struggle between the "positive" forces of progress and the "negative" forces of egoism and backwardness. The orthodox treatment of this theme consists in showing the forces of light embodied in a party activist whose function is to educate and convert the backward and egoistic elements. But in a number of recent works the "positive" hero has no spiritual home in the party. He is a lone wolf at odds with the party, which now stands for the forces of backwardness and egoism. The best-known example of this new approach is Vladimir Dudintsev's novel *Not by Bread Alone*, published in 1956,* which deals with an inventor's grueling lifelong battle against the apparatus. Less well known to the Western public is another

characteristic piece written in the new vein, Daniel Granin's short story "Own Opinion," also published in 1956.

In a number of works published since last year, the "positive" hero is lacking altogether. Three stories dealing with peasant life, Nikolai Zhdanov's "Homecoming," Alexander Yashin's "The Levers," and Yuri Nagibin's "The Ornament of Khasar," simply contrast the hopeless and miserable life of ordinary kolkhoz families with the power and affluence of the party secretaries who lord it over them. One of the principal characters in Galina Nikolayeva's novel, *The Struggle on the Road*, is the young wife of a high functionary. The novel describes the luxury that surrounds her until her husband is arrested for "treason," whereupon her friends desert her and she is plunged into the deepest misery. Eventually she discovers that the underworld characters among whom she now lives are less corrupt than the party bureaucrats: they may steal and cheat, but at least they do not pass themselves off as guardians of an idea.

These examples could be multiplied. Conventional specimens of "socialist realism," with positive hero and constructive conflict, are still being published in the Soviet Union, but they no longer monopolize the field. The guardians of literary orthodoxy are aghast at the emergence of works in which Soviet life is depicted without the customary pious idealization; authors writing in this new vein are regularly denounced.

A new body of literature has come into being, then, which portrays the party apparatus as a force cut off from the people and stifling their creative energies: a sterile, privileged caste that represents only itself and its own vested interests. The difference between this literature and the Polish-Hungarian confessional writings is one of presentation and emphasis. The Russian writers describe facts, and stop short of drawing political conclusions from them. But the facts speak clearly enough: they condemn the party for having betrayed the ideals in whose name it wields power.

*An English translation has just been brought out in this country by Dutton (512 pp., \$4.95).

The Polish and Hungarian confessional writings, as well as the nonconformist works of Russian writers, attack the party bureaucracy in the name of the party intelligentsia. During the Stalin era no such conflict between two elite groups in Soviet society could come out into the open. It was only after Stalin's death that shifts in the balance of power within the leadership enabled the intelligentsia to challenge and denounce the ruling bureaucracy. When the graveyard silence of the Stalin era was broken, the party intelligentsia was in a position to take advantage of the new situation, since it was close to the centers of power and had access to communication channels. But in addition the intelligentsia became stronger because it shed its inveterate sense of inferiority and insecurity. The policy of de-Stalinization, and its climax, Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Congress of the party, finally turned the scales. It is noteworthy that the rebellion of the *literati* began to gather momentum immediately after the Congress.

Khrushchev's speech stunned Communist believers everywhere, but its effect upon the party intelligentsia was particularly shocking. The speech not only painted a lurid picture of the indignities which Stalin had heaped upon his most faithful servants; it destroyed the seemingly unassailable argument which had compelled the intelligentsia to keep quiet about these indignities, despite their own doubts and scruples of conscience. For what Khrushchev was saying was that Stalin's personal tyranny had actually *weakened* the party. Thus intellectuals who took their faith seriously were plunged into a personal crisis. They felt they had to redeem themselves by making a clean break with the past.

Yet while anxious to accomplish this break, relatively few went so far as to leave the party altogether. Even in the West, where resigning from the party involves no major risk, Khrushchev's revelations did not lead to mass desertions. The characteristic response of the intelligentsia was to look for opportunities within the party to ex-

press their point of view, in disregard of the taboos imposed by the apparatus. These opportunities were of course far more limited in Russia than in Poland and Hungary. In the latter countries, the barriers restricting free expression broke, while in Russia the "thaw" was a limited affair, with many ups and downs.

Khrushchev and his associates in the party leadership were fully aware of the fact that de-Stalinization discredited the party's past. In their eyes, however, the replacement of one-man rule by collective leadership was sufficient to accomplish the necessary regeneration. The party had strayed from the correct path, but now it was again in tune with history. Stalin's excesses were a thing of the past; now the loyal party member could make his peace with the regime.

This was how things looked from the viewpoint of Stalin's heirs, but for the party intelligentsia collective leadership at the top was by no means sufficient for regeneration. Even with the excesses of Stalinism removed, a tightly knit, closed corporation of bureaucrats conserved its monopoly of power and its vested interests. This had nothing to do with fulfilling the revolutionary mandate of history. The apparatus had no revolutionary legitimacy; it had usurped its power. This feeling was expressed directly in the Polish and Hungarian confessional writings; the unorthodox Soviet literary works conveyed it by implication.

CAN the intelligentsia's attack upon the party apparatus seriously affect the political stability of Communist regimes? Clearly, the intelligentsia as such cannot play for big political stakes. It can only use its limited power to gain control over some significant channels of communication, and obtain a hearing for some unpleasant and unorthodox truths. But when this has happened, what then? Once introduced into the public mind, unorthodox ideas may cause revolutionary ferment. This was the case in Hungary and Poland; could it not happen in the Soviet Union itself?

In speculating about such possibilities, we should bear in mind the specific circumstances of the Polish and Hungarian upheavals. For the party intelligentsia in Poland and Hungary, the Communist seizure of power is of recent memory. The Communist intellectuals remember the rapture with which they greeted the advent of a new, better world; they also remember their subsequent bitter disappointments. For them, the betrayal of the revolution was an affront to which they eventually reacted with passionate anger. For the Soviet intelligentsia the seizure of power lies in the dim past. Only the few who survived all the purges have personal memories of the pre-revolutionary waiting for the dawn, the first flush of triumph, and the tragedy of disappointment; and these memories are overlaid by the intervening long decades of totalitarian consolidation. The younger generation acquired the Communist ideology through education; to them, the revolution is a historical cliché, not felt and experienced reality. Moreover, in the USSR the regime, oppressive as it is, still represents a national leadership, whereas in the satellite countries it is a symbol of colonial oppression and exploitation.

One can nevertheless say that the events in Warsaw and Budapest have lasting historical significance, in spite of the suppression of the Hungarian revolution. The rules of the political game in the Communist world have changed. It is now possible for the exponents of reform within the leadership to appeal to the masses through the intermediary of the party intelligentsia. The entrenched bureaucracy is aware of this. Thoroughly alerted, the bureaucrats are determined to see to it that "collective leadership" does not give would-be reformers of the Gomulka type a foothold within the system. The elimination of Malenkov in all probability represents a defensive maneuver of this kind. In the long run, however, the situation remains open. The continuity of bureaucratic party rule in Soviet Russia is in jeopardy. Any strong political personality of the second rank may henceforth upset it by appealing to the masses through the intelligentsia.

The desertion of the party intelligentsia does not necessarily mean the end of the party bureaucracy's power, but it has rendered it less secure. This is the political significance of the present ferment among the intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain.